

MISCELLANEOUS.

DR. PHELPS'S LETTER* ON "THE PRAISE OF HYPOCRISY."

To the Editor of The Open Court:

The position of Dr. Phelps is apparently indicated in his third paragraph, to the effect that he has "nothing to do with the truth or error" of what I had said, but "the question is whether it is judicious to gather up the unexploded shells of the besieging enemy, light their fuses and roll them into the ranks of the defenders."

Why he should raise such a question is not at once manifest; for, in fact, the "shells" were not taken from the enemy but from the defenders of Christianity. The men and churches whose confessions and defenses of hypocrisy form the basis and substance of all that I have said are orthodox Christians—for examples: Newman, Rashdall, Hodge, and the Communions they represent. One might indeed quote a host of heretics in favor of deceit; but the non-Christians whom I did quote on the subject (Achilles, Mohammed, Rénan, Huxley) spoke in praise of truth and sincerity, and against hypocrisy. But it might be expected that one who purposes to have nothing to do with questions of truth or error should misconceive the essentials of the situation.

Perhaps, however, Dr. Phelps will do better with the conclusions of his reasoning than with the premise.

His text is from the words of Jesus: "I have many things to say, but ye cannot bear them now." His thesis is, that "it is well to remain silent concerning some things." He proceeds thereupon to suggest that the things about which Jesus remained silent were that the changed circumstances soon to take place would make it necessary for the disciples "to grasp the world's weapons" and not be content with the sword of the Spirit. There is even a suggestion that the Church must hereafter "clothe herself in the armor of policy and apparent subserviency," and no longer avoid the appearance of evil. It must "kneel to the law of conformity," and not to God alone. In short, the straight and narrow way that leads to heaven may henceforth be as crooked as the way that leads from Philadelphia to Chicago—to adopt the expressive simile of Dr. Phelps.

*Our readers will remember Dr. Knight's article, "The Praise of Hypocrisy," in the *Open Court* for September, 1903, which created quite a stir and was upon the whole very well received by several clergymen, see for instance the letters published in the *Open Court* for October, 1903. Dr. Phelps' criticism appeared in the February number, page 117.

This is remarkable exegesis, to say the least, especially in view of the fact that immediately after the occasion of the words in question, Peter did grasp one "of the world's weapons" and smote the High Priest's servant. But he was rebuked for it, with the warning: "They that take the sword shall perish by the sword." Nor when circumstances had still more changed, did the Apostles carry any such weapons. To the end of his life, St. Paul would not "kneel to the law of conformity," but advised that we should "*not* be conformed to this world, but transformed." Authority in the New Testament seems to thoroughly refuse Dr. Phelps' understanding of the words of Jesus.

Dr. Phelps is not much happier in interpreting the divine method than the divine word. In his concluding paragraph he grants that a reformation is needed, but thinks that an individual only can do the work. For "God never sends a Church about his work, but He fills a man with his spirit." Is that quite true? God does indeed at times send a single individual, but does not the one soon join with others to form a company or communion, and are they not all together sent also? Christ is represented in the New Testament as purposing to form a Church, and Paul was sent to "make known through the Church the wisdom of God;" and we are repeatedly exhorted to "hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches." The Church is called the embodiment of the Kingdom of God, or of the Spirit of Christ, and we are called members of that body. Whereof "if one member suffer, all individuals suffer with it, and if one is honored all rejoice." The value of the Church of Christ may be small, in the judgment of Dr. Phelps; and yet there are those who love it, and who feel so keenly the dishonor of some of its members, that they cannot "remain silent," as the doctor advises.

Dr. Phelps says "it is not intellectual honesty . . . but honesty of purpose and desire in the heart . . . that will make the needed reform." But would not honesty of purpose be more effective if joined with intellectual honesty—which I suppose means consistency? Perhaps, however, Dr. Phelps does not believe in being consistent. For I observe that, in strange contrast with his estimate of honest purpose just quoted, he says on the previous page, "The fact that Dr. Knight is honest and sincere in his purpose has nothing to do with the effect of his utterances," and so on. At one time honest purpose has *nothing* to do, at another, *everything* to do.

By the way, which kind of honesty is it that purposes to hold up the standard of a creed which one does not believe, and will both subscribe to it one's self and require others to do so? It seems to be of "purpose," but it sounds very unlike the doctrine of Jesus. Nor am I persuaded that it was this kind of thing which he might have taught but withheld, out of regard for the weakness of his disciples. Yet if it be that, one can easily see why they "could not bear it." It would have been a great shock to them after certain very severe remarks about those who pretend to open the Kingdom of God, yet really shut it, to hear him go back on his teaching and praise them.

Such is Dr. Phelps' argument in favor of silence. He seems also to intend at the same time to answer the editor's call for a remedy for the disease of the Church. His answer is, "*do nothing*." Indeed the only suggestion of action in his letter is ironic, by which his first paragraph likens me to "Goliath whose armory furnished the weapon to cut off his head." But

even this suggestion he does not follow out, unless it was in pious imitation of David that he omitted to furnish his own armory with anything having either point or edge. If his resemblance to that doughty Hebrew had extended further there might have been *something* doing, though, perhaps, at my expense.

However, it is not for anything so far said that I now write. It is rather that Dr. Phelps is a type of many who, without being hypocrites themselves, yet in effect apologize for hypocrisy, and who, when a man confesses that he practices deceit and defends it, are so shocked that they refuse to believe the confession. And if another calls attention to it, they accuse him and not the sinner. They customarily refuse to face unpleasant facts, they "have nothing to do with truth or error," they strive to minimize the occasion, they turn aside to discuss policy and invent strange exegesis and interpretation. By a law of the mind they before long succeed in concealing the issue, for self and followers. "None so blind as those who will not see." Of course a moral decline follows the defeat of the intellect, taking the form, now of cringing saintliness, and again of open hypocrisy. More often, perhaps, there is bred a kind of despair of ever being able to arrive at truth, leading to an undervaluation of truth and of loyalty to it or of honesty. Hence, many Christians actually suppose that religion is of the emotions alone; that it is independent of creeds, facts and truth; that it can consist with any creed or no creed. Who was it that said he "could sign all the creeds in Christendom"? They are his kind to-day to whom it makes no difference whether Jesus lived and did as recorded in the New Testament, or who, with Dr. Phelps, say "let the creeds stand if they will," a good purpose will save us, and meanwhile we wait for something to turn up.

In other words, an important symptom of the disease of the Church is the neglect of the truth, the unwillingness to apply intelligence to the facts. Such is the meaning of the experts.

Presidents Eliot and Harper have lately said (if reports be correct) that "the Church is losing connection with intelligence." President Paine in his last book said, "Can we wonder that the churches are honeycombed with elements of insincerity and hypocrisy, or that the world is ready to ask whether Christianity itself in its organized form, judging by its moral exhibitions, is not an imposture and a sham?"

Dr. Phelps himself is not entirely blind to the facts; he does by implication allow that there is something wrong in the Church. But, he says, let the good and evil "grow together until the harvest." But have we not harvest enough already—counting up those who openly advocate deceit and crookedness, with those who apologize for it and those who are in hopeless apostasy from the truth? Or must we, as the doctor advises, wait for a more bitter harvest yet? That depends on whether the Christians will still hold to their confusions and sins, and will resent the summons to sincerity—a summons which, however imperfectly, I have tried to echo from the stronger voices of the good and wise.

One thing is sure. Those voices have not been raised against the true "Church, Religion, and . . . Christianity." These great institutions are not in the slightest danger from men who assail hypocrisy. On the other hand, they are in danger from traitors within the camp, who boldly attack the citadel of sincerity, and from those trembling saints who apologize for

treason, minimize its offense, or deny its existence, however manifest. These are they who "with melancholy irony furnish weapons against themselves and against Christianity," to use the doctor's own phrase.

I am sorry to have shaken the faith of a good man, and therefore beg the privilege of suggesting a means of relief. I would remind Dr. Phelps that there are two kinds of faith. One, mistaking sect for the Church, sentiment or ritual for Religion, and tradition for Christianity, is naturally liable to overthrow or distress on every occasion of advance of knowledge, for the very reason that it has attached itself to the transitory which it mistook for the permanent. This is the faith that has nothing to do with truth and which scoffs at consistency.

The other kind of faith, while it recognizes the value of sect, custom and tradition, yet is also aware of their subordinate character, and is so much more attached to the truth which is eternal, that it scarcely suffers at all by the passing of a transitory form. Least of all does it suffer by an assault on falsehood; it rejoices in that.

In short, the same prescription which in another connection I suggested for the Church in general, I would now suggest for Dr. Phelps. Let him take large doses of truth, honesty and sincerity. He will soon begin to mend. Before long he will be able to distinguish friend from foe, to distinguish an attack on sin from an attack on Christianity; he will not be driven to fictitious interpretations of divine things; he will find no occasion for the policy of inaction or concealment, or for otherwise stultifying intelligence and conscience; and at length he will come to a solid and enduring faith, with increasing health, courage and joy in every new truth.

RELIGION IN FRANCE.

The August (1903) number of *The Open Court* contained a letter of mine, which requires certain corrections and explanations. This letter was not originally intended for publication, and the proofs intended for my revision failed to reach me. My knowledge of the English language is limited and I may, on that account, not be clear in certain statements, but I will do my best to make myself understood.

My first comment is of little importance. In using the expression, "It was written," I meant to say that "it was foreordained," that sooner or later the people of France would get rid of "the congregations" (i. e., the religious societies having their own rules and regulations in contrast to the secular clergy). The natural progress of civilization is such that whatever form of government we may have had, whatever our national and social state may have been, France was compelled by the requirements of her history to rid herself of these religious corporations. Things might have been otherwise had Protestantism become the prevailing religion of our country, or had Louis XIV. not signed the edict of Nantes.

My second comment is of a more general nature. It refers to the paragraph marked (i) page 507. I answer the question "What is religion?" by saying: "It is simply the adoration of, and prayer to, someone, anthropomorphically conceived, who is capable of seeing our adoration, of hearing and answering our prayers." But, someone may claim that no person exists